

EPA snuffed out tobacco studies

Critics blame pressure from industry

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NEW YORK (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency has quietly dropped tobacco from its studies of indoor air pollutants, a move that critics said was made in response to pressure from the tobacco industry.

EPA officials confirmed that tobacco research had been dropped but denied doing so because of industry pressure.

Separately, Peter Guerrero of the Congressional General Accounting Office, said his office had launched two investigations of the EPA's secondhand smoke studies.

The termination of the tobacco research program occurred two years ago, just as the EPA was completing the first draft of a report on secondhand smoke and lung cancer that is being released today.

The decision to halt the program was not widely known. Critics said the release of the lung cancer report prompted them to speak out.

Until the end of 1990, the agency conducted experiments on cigarette smoke as part of its indoor air research program, based in North Carolina. The program was one of the largest federal research efforts on the health effects of secondhand smoke, said the EPA's Peter Preuss.

The program conducted basic research. It was not directly connected to the EPA division that prepares risk assessments, such as the one being released today. That division was not affected by the change in the indoor air research program.

EPA officials denied they acted in response to tobacco industry lobbying. "I can tell you categorically that there was no industry pressure that I knew of," said Erich Brethauer, assistant administrator for research and development.

The tobacco research program was doing a lot of work on the effects of secondhand smoke in children. "All of that work has been killed," said an EPA scientist who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Preuss said the research was dropped because the agency had completed its central aims and wanted to move to other pollutants.

"It's outrageous that the EPA has terminated funding of the most important indoor air pollutant," said Stanton Glantz of the University of California-San Francisco. "The EPA had one of the best research programs in the world."

The decision to drop studies of tobacco smoke could hamper EPA work on other pollutants, said Dr. Albert Collier, a pediatrician at the University of North Carolina.

The GAO probes were requested by Reps. John Dingell, D-Mich., chairman of the House oversight and investigations subcommittee, and Virginia's Thomas J. Bliley, the committee's ranking Republican.

One investigation concerns the adequacy of the EPA's scientific peer reviews, in which EPA documents are critiqued by other scientists to assure accuracy.

The other investigation is directed at the leak of a draft EPA report on secondhand smoke and heart disease.

The report was initially intended to be a companion to the lung cancer report. A copy was obtained by The Associated Press in May 1991.

The heart disease report, which found that secondhand smoke causes 37,000 heart disease deaths in U.S. nonsmokers each year, was killed by the EPA because it is out of date, Robert Axelrad, head of the EPA's indoor air division, said Tuesday. The report was completed and given to Axelrad in April 1991.

"The reason it's out of date is because he has been sitting on it," said Glantz, one of the report's authors.

"I think it's unfortunate Mr. Axelrad caved into political pressure from the industry."

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